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THE RUINED CITY OF COPAN.

BY

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The exploits of Cortes and the conquest of Mexico, rendered into popular literature by Prescott, are chiefly responsible for the common belief that north of the Isthmus of Panama the high-water mark of pre-Columbian civilization on the American continent was that reached by the Aztecs. It is true that at the time of the conquest the Aztecs were the dominant race; they were then at the height of their power and glory, and their influence was more extended than that of any other nation. It is not intended to detract from the brilliancy of the Aztec civilization, as set forth in the testimony of eye-witnesses at the time of the conquest; but, compared with that of another civilization that had already passed away, it was as the brightness of the full meridian moon to the splendor of the sun that has already set. Nor is it claimed that the Aztec culture was a borrowed culture. That is a matter involving vast differences of opinion; and it is characteristic that while so much ingenuity has been wasted in vain speculation, so little has been accomplished by actual investigation that it is still a matter of dispute whether the Maya culture was developed on the soil where its remains are found or brought with the people from parts unknown; whether the Aztecs borrowed from the Mayas, or the Mayas from the Aztecs, or whether both these great nations derived their culture from the Toltecs. And again, it is claimed that the Toltecs themselves are nothing more than the figures of a sun-myth.

The two great aboriginal civilizations of the North American continent that furnish us with material for investigation and study are those of the Aztecs and the Mayas. The relationship between them is not clearly defined, but it is noteworthy that these two peoples, having an entirely separate political existence, differing radically in language and customs, had legends which appear to have had a community of origin in some indefinitely remote past.

At the time of the conquest there was a remnant of a population on the peninsula of Yucatan,—a number of tribes who still haunted the vicinity of the deserted cities,—and these are generally believed to have been the descendants of the builders, though this is by no means certain. They called themselves Maya people; their lan-

guage, they said, was Mayathan, the Maya speech; and their ancient capital they called Mayapan, which means literally the Maya banner, and in this connection means the Maya capital. This was the first acquaintance of Europeans with the name Maya. At the present day the name is applied generically to all the affiliated tribes speaking dialects derived from the same ancient stock as the Maya proper, and specifically to that ancient civilization the remains of which are found scattered over Yucatan and Central America.

Notwithstanding the many ingenious theories that have been advanced to explain their existence, we are almost as much in the dark concerning the Mayas to-day as we ever were. The student who seeks a knowledge of their history and all that pertains to it, even in the light of the most recent investigations, is like a voyager on an unknown coast, who sees from the deck the broken outline of an unfamiliar land, with a bold headland here and there a lofty peak, while all beyond is doubt and mystery.

The picture that is presented to the mind of the student by the name Maya is that of a mysterious race emerging from the unknown, and playing their part on the checker-board of nations until the hand of fate sweeps them back into the darkness from which they emerged, and the only evidence we have that they ever existed consists in the relics of their art and industry that lie buried in the soil of their ancient empire.

The field offers splendid opportunities for discovery, but until the general interest of those who have it in their power to promote the cause of American exploration is more fully aroused the history of the Mayas must remain what it is, a sealed volume, whose title suggests a world of tempting possibilities. American archæology is yet in its infancy. While so much has been done to throw light on the ancient civilizations of the East; while the pyramids have given up their dead, and been made to tell the secret of the ages; while Baalbec has been born; while Babylon and Nineveh are born again, and Priam's city on the plain has seen again the long forgotten sun,—Palenque and Copan have been allowed to continue their slumber of oblivion. Indeed, it is not so very long since the very existence of prehistoric monuments on the American continent was denied. And yet the tropical jungles of America hide the ruins of capitals not less wonderful than famed Palmyra or the City of the Sun.

If we enquire into the reason for this comparative indifference to American ruins, it is partly to be found in their apparently irrela-

tive character, in their irrelevancy to the great drama of history as it is known to us. They have no place in the tide of traditional and legendary lore, the art and literature, the myth and poetry that is the common inheritance of European nations. No surviving civilization has inherited anything from the Maya civilization, and so Palenque and Copan cannot excite the same feelings as ancient Tyre or Dido's city by the sea; yet this very isolation gives to American ruins a character that is absolutely unique, and creates for them an interest that is peculiar and apart. They present a spectacle that is unparalleled in the history of the world. In complete isolation, shut off from all knowledge of other civilizations, the Mayas reached by themselves a high state of culture, and approached in a surprising degree the condition of the highest civilizations of antiquity.

Another reason why they have not attracted more attention is that they are hidden in the wilds or among the mountains of untravelled and unexplored regions, buried in dense forest and difficult of access. From the valley of Mexico, the centre of its power and influence, the Aztec civilization had at the time of the conquest spread itself to the Gulf of Mexico and to the Pacific Ocean, from the River Panuco in the north to the Gulf of Tehuantepec in the south, with small outlying colonies still farther south. The broad plains of Yucatan and the fertile valleys of Central America comprise the theatre where the much older Maya civilization had its rise, culmination and decline. It is on this peninsula of Yucatan that the Maya power seems to have reached its ultimate development, and it is here that their ruined cities are most numerous. The principal ruins known to us to-day are those of Chichen, Labna, Mitla and Uxmal in Yucatan, Palenque and Ocoingo in Chiapas, Tikal, Menche and Quirigua in Guatemala, and Copan on the western frontier of Honduras.

Copan, then, is the name by which one of the most remarkable of these ruined cities is known to us, and it is for the presentation of some of the most remarkable features of this ruined city that I ask your attention for the space of an hour. Whether or not this was the name by which it was known to its ancient inhabitants we do not know, but when we examine the etymology of the word, its appropriateness suggests a probability in its favor. The substantive *pan* in the Maya language means primarily "banner," but when applied to a city as a part of its name it was equivalent to "capital." Thus as Mayapan was the capital of Maya, so Copan would mean the capital of Co, a name, however, that appears on no

written record known to us. And while Copan belongs to the same ancient civilization as Palenque in Chiapas, the two were not necessarily contemporaneous. It is more probable that Copan was the former home of the people who founded the later Maya empire in Yucatan and Chiapas. Co may have been the ancestor of Maya. Hidden away among the mountains of Honduras in a beautiful valley, which even in that little travelled country is unusually secluded, it stands as a monument to the extraordinary enterprise and ambition of its rulers. The existence of this lost city was first made known to the world in 1840 by Stephens and Catherwood, who gave a description in the "Incidents of Travel in Central America," but their account was received by many with skepticism and mistrust, and the temporary interest which was then awakened was not revived until 1885, when Mr. A. P. Maudslay, of London, made the first survey of the ruins and presented the South Kensington Museum with a set of casts and photographs of the principal monuments. In 1890, the Peabody Museum at Harvard University began a series of explorations among the ruins that have been followed by very gratifying results, and it is hoped that these explorations may be renewed in the near future.

The only roads leading to the ruins are rough mule trails over the mountains, which are often impassable, and over these we had to transport on pack mules, from the coast, all our supplies and apparatus. The distance by the roundabout trail can be covered on a good mule in five days, but the native muleteers in charge of the pack trains can easily occupy three weeks in making the journey.

Stephens, the discoverer, states that at the time of his visit in 1839 the whole valley was buried in deep forest, the abode of monkeys and jaguars. To-day there are no monkeys in the vicinity, and the dark, gloomy forest where they like to roam is wanting. This forest was cut down about thirty years ago by a colony from Guatemala, who came to plant in the fertile lands of the valley the tobacco for which, much more than for the ruins, that valley is celebrated throughout Central America to-day. They left the trees that grew upon the higher structures, making a picturesque grove, a few cedars and ceibas of gigantic proportions, clustered round the ruins of the temple, shrouding them in a sombre shade and sending their huge roots into the crevices and unexplored chambers, vaults and galleries of the vast edifices.

The area occupied by the ruins of the city consists of a level plain about eight miles in length and two miles wide at the great-

est, shut in by mountains that rise in ridges to a height of three thousand feet. The Copan River enters through a gorge to the east, and, after winding through the plain, disappears through a gorge to the west. The whole of this plain is covered with the remains of stone structures, probably the dwellings of the upper classes. The streets, squares and courtyards were paved with stone or with a white mortar cement, made from lime and powdered rock; and the drainage was accomplished by means of covered canals and underground sewers. Around the outskirts of the city and along the foothills of the mountains are seen numerous stone foundations, which probably supported the wooden houses of the people. On the slopes of the mountains surrounding the valley, and even on the tops of the highest peaks, fallen columns and ruined structures may be seen.

On the right bank of the river, in the midst of the city, stands the principal group of structures—the temples, palaces and buildings of a public character. These form part of what has been called for want of a better name the Main Structure, a vast irregular pile, rising from the plain in steps and terraces of masonry and terminating in several great pyramidal elevations, each topped by the remains of a temple, which, before our excavations were begun, looked like a huge pile of fragments bound together by the roots of trees; while the slopes of the pyramids and the terraces and pavements below are strewn with the ruins of these superb edifices. This huge structure, unlike the great pyramids of Egypt and other ancient works of a similar character, is not the embodiment of a definite idea, built in accordance with a preconceived plan and for a specific purpose. It is rather the complex result of a long process of development, corresponding to the growth of culture, and keeping pace with the expanding tastes of the people or the demands of their national life. Its sides face the four cardinal points; its greatest length from north to south is about eight hundred feet, and from east to west it measured originally nearly as much; but a part of the eastern side has been carried away by the swift current of the river, which flows directly against it. The interior construction, where it is exposed by the action of the current, presents to view fragments of walls and floors down to the water's edge. There seems to be layer upon layer of older ruins far beneath the foundations of those now occupying the surface, and if these are ancient, what must be said of those that are at the bottom of it all?

In the midst of the Main Structure, at an elevation of sixty feet, is a court one hundred and twenty feet square, which, with its sur-

rounding architecture must have presented a magnificent spectacle when it was entire. It was entered from the south through a passage thirty feet in width between two high pyramidal foundations, each supporting a temple. A thick wall pierced in the centre by a gateway, now stripped of its adornments and in ruins, guarded this passage to the south. The court itself is enclosed by ranges of steps or seats rising to a height of twenty feet, as in an amphitheatre; they are built of great blocks of stone neatly cut and regularly laid without mortar. In the centre of the western side is a stairway projecting a few feet into the court and leading to a broad terrace above the range of seats, and guarded at either end by the figure of a rampant jaguar. The upper steps in this stairway are divided in the midst by the head of a huge dragon facing the court, and holding in his distended jaws a grotesque human head of colossal proportions. To the north of the court stood the two magnificent temples, 21 and 22, which are among the most interesting yet explored, and which may be taken as types of this class of building. Only the lower walls of these buildings remain standing, but the enormous quantities of stone removed during the excavation show that they must have had several stories, while the number of sculptures bear witness to their elaborate adornment. From the stone-paved terrace above the northern side of the court a great stairway, with massive steps, leads up to a platform that runs the whole length of temple 22, and is carried out upon solid piers to the line of beginning of the steps. From the head of the stairway two graceful wing stones, extending across the platform, guard the approach to the first entrance which gives access to the outer chambers. The doorway was nine feet wide and was covered by a vaulted roof now fallen. Directly opposite it in the interior is a second doorway leading to the inner chambers. A step two feet high runs in front of the entrance, with a row of hieroglyphs below; at either end a huge death's head forms a pedestal for a crouching human figure supporting the head of a dragon whose body is turned upward and is lost in the scrollwork of a cornice that runs above the entrance. The blocks of stone forming the arch had fallen when the place was cleared, and it seems probable that they had been supported by wooden lintel and door jambs which had entirely disappeared. Among the ruins of this temple were found a great many heads and busts which must have adorned its fallen facades. All the interior walls were covered with a thin coat of stucco, on which figures and scenes were painted in various colors, and interior cornices were adorned with stucco figures and

other ornaments, likewise painted. Nearly all this painted plaster and stucco, of course, was fallen, and found only in fragments. All that remains of this building was literally buried in a mass of broken sculptures with which it had been adorned.

Another feature of the main structure is the western court, which is on the same level as the eastern. Its broken pavement is strewn with sculptures fallen from the high temples 11 and 26. Here rises the double stairway leading to the entrance of temple 26, of which only the foundation remains. This stairway is adorned with rows of colossal skulls or death's heads, which give the place an extraordinary air of solemnity and gloom. Here also stands the great altar or table Q, with its procession of priests carved on the four sides and an inscription on top. To the north of the main structure the great plaza, paved with stone and cement, stretches away to the north and terminates in an amphitheatre about three hundred feet square, enclosed on the eastern, northern and western sides by ranges of seats twenty feet high. The southern side is open, except that its centre is occupied by a pyramid that rose almost to a point, leaving a square platform on top. In the plaza stood the principal group of obelisks, monoliths or stelæ, as they are variously designated, to which Copan owes its principal fame. There are fifteen in all scattered over the plaza, some overthrown and others still erect. On the northern wing of the main structure rises the hieroglyphic stairway, one of the most important features that our excavations brought to light. From the cemented floor of the plaza it rose to the entrance of the temple above, of which not one stone remained upon another. The upper part of the stairway itself was thrown from its place as if by an earthquake and lay strewn upon the lower portion, and the whole structure is in a sad state of ruin. When discovered the stairway was buried beneath the débris fallen from the temple. The upper portion of the stairway itself had been thrown from its place and lay strewn upon the lower portion, and the whole was covered with a thick growth of trees. The width of the structure was thirty feet; each step is carved along its entire length by a row of hieroglyphs. The centre of the lower steps is occupied by a throne or pedestal, and at intervals in the ascent a figure of noble and commanding appearance, arrayed in splendid attire, was seated on the steps. On either side is a solid balustrade, all elaborately carved with symbolical devices, and supporting a number of portrait-like busts which are held in the jaws of some grotesque monster.

At twenty feet in front of the stairway stands an obelisk twelve

feet high, having a full-length figure on the front and a hieroglyphic inscription on the back.

We come now to the monoliths, or stelæ. There are 27 in all scattered over the ruins, some overthrown and broken and some still standing. Although they have infinite variety in detail these monuments are in general design alike. In the front of each monument stands a human figure in high relief; the hands are held in front of the breast in an attitude that is common to them all; the nose is broken off, but it was probably prominent and aquiline; the mouth is open so as to show the teeth; the ears are shown in a conventional way; the hair is pushed back from the forehead and hangs in braids at either side of the head; the headdress is made up of folds or plaits of some stiff material, and at each corner of it appears a dragon's head. There is a breastplate with a dragon's head holding a grotesque monster in his jaws at either end. Next comes a broad girdle, with a row of tassels at the bottom and decorated with panels and with a medallion face in front and another over either hip. An apron hangs from the belt to the ground; there are garters on the legs and sandals on the feet. Above the head is a grotesque mask, with a double scroll terminating the carving at the top. The figures are all disproportionately short, and the artist seems to have been more bent on displaying the adornment than on making a good job of his figure. Some of the smaller figures found are accurately drawn.

The back of each stela, and the sides not occupied by the figure, has usually a hieroglyphic inscription.

That the Mayas were a literary people is shown by the fact that they possessed, among other concomitants of civilization, a highly developed system of writing, a system which was their peculiar property, and in these characters they carved upon the walls of their temples and on their monuments inscriptions that may contain the key to their history, if we could only read them. But there is no Champollion and no Rosetta stone, and yet something has been accomplished towards their interpretation: for although no living man can read a single inscription, the results of recent investigation are encouraging; and although we may never arrive at a full and accurate knowledge of the system of writing, we will surely in time be able to glean the general drift of the meaning of these inscriptions. Until very recently the veil of mystery that hung over these inscriptions was absolutely impenetrable, and it is only now that anything definite has been discovered in regard to their meaning.

These results relate entirely to the Maya chronological system, and their methods of computing time, and they enable us to read the dates on these inscriptions in Maya chronology. The Maya calendar scheme, though elaborate, was altogether admirable and perfect. Through it we are brought in contact with the Maya genius, a genius which, in utter isolation, reduced the year to perfect reckoning and mapped the courses of the planets. The basis of the annual calendar was the solar year of 365 days, and every fourth year was a bissextile or leap year. The year was divided into eighteen months of twenty days each, with one short month of five days at the end. Each of the twenty days of the month had its name, and these names we know, together with the names of the months themselves.

This, in brief, was the basis of the annual calendar. But when the Mayas dealt with extended periods of time they adopted another system, the basis of which was not the solar year, but a period of 360 days, called the *ahau*. The *ahau* was divided into eighteen months or *chuens* or periods of twenty days. Twenty *ahaus* made a *katun*, and twenty *katuns* made a cycle, and thirteen cycles made a great cycle. The cycle thus embraced four hundred years, and the great cycle fifty-two hundred years.

Among the numerous objects doing service as decorative features on temples, stelæ and altars, the two most conspicuous are the serpent and the bird, and a combination of the two—the feathered serpent. The trail of this grotesque and monstrous creation is over every city and every temple, and wherever he is met with his main features are the same.

No regular burying-place has yet been found at Copan, but a number of isolated tombs have been explored. The location of these was strange and unexpected—beneath the pavement of courtyards and under the foundations of houses. They consist of small chambers of very excellent masonry, roofed sometimes by means of the corbelled arch, and sometimes by means of slabs of stone, resting on the top of the vertical walls. In these tombs one, and sometimes two, interments had been made. The bodies had been laid at full length upon the floor. The cerements had long since mouldered away, and the skeletons themselves were in a crumbling condition, and gave little knowledge of the physical characteristics of the people; but one fact of surpassing interest came to light concerning their private lives, namely the custom of adorning the front teeth with gems inlaid in the enamel, and by filing. Although not all of the sets of teeth found had been treated in this way,

there were enough to show that the practice was general, at least among the upper classes, for all the tombs opened, from their associations with prominent houses, seem to have belonged to people of rank or fortune. The stone used in the inlaying was a bright green jadeite. A circular cavity about one-sixteenth of an inch in diameter was drilled in the enamel of each of the two front teeth of the upper row, and inlaid with a little disk of jadeite, cut to a perfect fit, and secured by means of a bright-red cement.

Besides the human remains, each tomb contained a number of earthenware vessels of great beauty and excellence of workmanship, some of them painted with figures in various colors, and others finished with a peculiar polish resembling a glaze. Some of these vessels contained charcoal and ashes, in others were various articles of use and adornment. The beads, ear-ornaments, medallions and a variety of other ornaments, usually of jadeite, exhibit an extraordinary degree of skill in the art of cutting and polishing stones, while the pearls and trinkets carved from shell must have been obtained by trade or by journeys to the coast. In the same tombs with these ornaments were frequently found such objects of utility as knives and spear-heads of flint and obsidian, and stone hatchets and chisels. These were doubtless family vaults, though none of them contained the remains of many burials.

As to the antiquity of Copan, although we have no data that will enable us to fix a date, there are certain historical facts that remove it from the reach of history or tradition, and place the era of its destruction long anterior to the discovery of America.

In 1524 Alvarado subdued the tribes in the province of Guatemala, and founded the city of that name. From this as a centre the dominion of the Spanish arms was gradually extended over all of Central America, and intercourse opened with settlements already established.

What was the condition of Copan at this time? Surely such a centre of wealth and power, with all its barbaric splendor and extended influence, had it still existed, would not have escaped the ambitious enterprise of the conquerors. According to custom, the exploits of boasting generals and the zeal of missionaries ought to have spread its fame through the length and breadth of the Spanish dominions. All that we find, however, in the written records of that time is a brief mention of an expedition sent in 1530 from Guatemala, under the leadership of Hernando de Chaves, who conquered an Indian stronghold called Copan, situated somewhere in this region; but from the brief and ambiguous account given, it is

evident that the place, in strength and importance, must have been insignificant compared with the city of antiquity, the ruins of which are called Copan to-day, and concerning which history and tradition are silent.

Moreover, Hernando Cortes, during his march from Mexico to Honduras in 1525, must have passed within a few days' journey of Copan; yet neither he nor any of his companions makes any mention of such a place, though several of them give detailed accounts of the journey. Would the conqueror of Mexico have turned aside when such a prize was in his way?

Furthermore, in 1576 Don Diego Garcia de Palacio, an officer of the King of Spain, journeying from Guatemala to San Pedro, passed through the ruins, and in a letter to Philip II—a letter that is still preserved in the British Museum—describes what he saw there. His description is such as might be written to-day by any intelligent traveller; the buildings were in complete ruin, and the Indians who lived in the vicinity were unable to give him any enlightenment concerning them. Yet this was only forty-six years after the expedition of Chaves.

There is but one reasonable conclusion: the city was abandoned and in ruins long before the arrival of the Spaniards; all tradition concerning it was lost, and its name forgotten. Its glory was never beheld by Europeans. Could we conceive of that privilege as having been theirs, what would have been their astonishment when, issuing from the rocky passes and dangerous defiles of the cordilleras, they first beheld the vision of this enchanted valley with its guardian city. Standing in such a situation, and gazing on that scene in its present aspect, clothed in the melancholy charm of the wilderness, I was filled with admiration at the consciousness of what must have been, from the beauty of the situation and the barbaric grandeur of its architecture, the effect of that proud city in its prime.

The moral effect of all these ruins on the traveller who sojourns among them is not easily described. They have an atmosphere that is not shared by any other ruins in the world. The silence of the tomb pervades them. The solemn and sympathetic shade of the forest wraps them, like the sacred dead, as in a shroud of living verdure, where clinging moss and ferns, as though in pity, seem to hide what time has worn away. The impression they make is one of fallen power and grandeur, and while they may not convey the same feeling of majestic and eternal strength as some of the Old World ruins, they possess a beauty and solemnity that has stood the

ravages of time and speaks in no uncertain terms of fallen pride and power and glory, the baffled dreams and hopes and plans of an utterly unknown and nameless people. But while the eye is captivated by their melancholy charm, the imagination is often pained by the unavailing effort to penetrate the hidden mystery, an effort that becomes a necessity through the tormenting curiosity they excite.